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Testimony before the Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights
House Committee on International Relations

The First Annual State Department Report on International Religious Freedom

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On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I wish to thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for holding these critically important hearings today. Mr. Chairman, your stalwart support over many years for religious freedom throughout the world and your championing the International Religious Freedom Act itself is to be heartily commended. Continued attention on the part of the Congress to this most fundamental issue is in our judgment essential to mobilizing the appropriate foreign policy tools to deal with religious persecution abroad.

I am appearing here as the representative of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom of which I am one of ten Commissioners. Our Chair Rabbi David Saperstein and Vice Chair Michael Young are both on travel today at conferences dealing with issues relating to religious liberty. Ambassador Robert Seiple, who is a witness for the State Department at today's hearings, is also on our Commission as an ex officio member. As you know, the Commission was established under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which also mandated the State Department report that we are discussing today. The Commission is charged with advising the President and Congress on strengthening religious freedom and combating religious persecution worldwide. It is part of the Commission's mandate to evaluate the decisions of the Administration whether to designate a country for particular concern and recommend effective responses where appropriate. In a few weeks we will be holding our own set of hearings on the State Department report.

Last month, the Commission welcomed the release of the State Department's first Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. Over one thousand pages in length, it reflects a monumental effort on the part of Ambassador Robert Seiple and his Office on International Religious Freedom at the Department of State. We appreciate that producing this report may have been a cultural wrench for the State Department and foreign service officers who are accustomed to dealing mostly with human rights reports on political persecution and political prisoners.

Of course it is always possible in this type of exercise to critique specific country reports, but as the first attempt by the State

Department to describe the status of religious freedom worldwide in one compilation it is a step in the right direction. We again express our appreciation to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Ambassador Seiple for their diligence in producing the report.

What is most extraordinary, Mr. Chairman, however is the priority listing of countries of particular concern or "CPC's" that the State Department released at today's hearing. The report itself contains an overwhelming and unselective compilation of facts and information without reaching definitive conclusions, or conveying a sense of priority. In a report of this magnitude and type, prioritizing American concerns becomes essential. Not to do so is to lose sight of severe persecutors in a welter of detail. Congress wisely understood this danger and foresaw the need to give real focus and priority through "CPC" designations.

The Commission is especially pleased that the governments of China and Sudan are on State's brief CPC listing and will receive appropriate focus and the concerted attention of the U.S. State Department, Congress and our Commission, as well as others in the non- governmental sector, by virtue of this designation. It is this CPC designation that triggers under the Act a Presidential announcement within 90 days of what policies the Administration will adopt to improve religious freedom in the countries in question.

China and Sudan are the two countries that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has decided so far to review during its first year of work as countries with "severe and ongoing problems of religious persecution." China has the world's largest number of religious prisoners, while Sudan's government is waging the largest genocidal war in the world today, replete with slavery, scorched-earth bombings and calculated starvation, against its religious minorities in the south and central part of the country.

Arguments can be made that many other countries should be included on today's list. Mr. Chairman, I believe that the issuance of this highly-selective CPC list that includes China, the world's largest religious persecutor, and Sudan, the world's most hideous persecutor, will send the strongest possible signal both to officials here and to governments throughout the world of a renewed recognition of the salience of religious freedom to American foreign policy.

I believe there is no better way to help the persecuted religious believers in Vietnam, Pakistan, Egypt, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere than to see China and Sudan become first cases on a short-list of countries where the U.S. is prepared to spend political capital to end the scourge of religious genocide and persecution. Targeting a powerful nation like China and a rogue state like Sudan in a foreign policy priority listing signals that business may not be conducted as usual -- that the United States may be adopting a zero tolerance policy

for hard-core religious persecutors. This possibility of a change in movement in foreign policy will be the best assurance to persecuted peoples everywhere. We have observed that foreign governments are keenly aware of the report and, as of this morning, are on notice that America has a deep abiding concern for religious freedom for all peoples and may be prepared to act accordingly in its foreign policy.

If this listing is meant for something more than a one-day commentary, however, the United States must take appropriate follow-up action and apply pressure against the CPC's from its range of foreign policy tools. Two steps in particular should occur:

First, the Administration should exhibit leadership in making Sudan the pariah state with the same concerted moral and political action that succeeded in making a pariah out of the apartheid government of South Africa. Today's financial pages are reporting about the enormous amounts of international investments going into Sudan from companies such as the Canadian Talisman Energy, Inc. and China National Petroleum. According to the Speaker of Sudan's Parliament, Hassan Turabi, the revenues from these oil investments will be used to shore up Sudan's military arsenal in its genocidal war.

Second, the Administration must demonstrate that the United States will not build its relations with China on sand and that America understands that appeasement of a government that persecutes as many as one hundred million believers is neither consistent with our values or our tradition, nor will it serve our long-term interests. History has demonstrated that American interests are best served by relations predicated on the defense of principles that are shared by civilized nations around the world. Mr. Chairman, the Commission believes that the Administration has made a great forward stride in producing the report, and most importantly in prioritizing American concerns. We lookforward to working with the Administration and Congress over the next critical three months when policies are to be developed regarding China, Sudan and the other CPC's. It is critical, now this process has begun, that there be appropriate follow-through in terms of policy action. In China, Sudan, and the other "countries of particular concern" the lives of millions of religious believers are quite literally at stake.